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SERBIA/MONTENEGRO: Attacks on religious minorities in 2002

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Following the attack on an open-air Christian music concert last Friday (See F18News 11 August 2003), Forum 18 News Service presents this chronological list of attacks on religious minorities that took place in Serbia/Montenegro during the year 2002. The attackers had a variety of motives, from religious intolerance to the hope of criminal gains. Adventists, Jews, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, Nazarenes, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Reformed, Campus Crusade for Christ, Evangelicals, and Anglicans were all victims of different types of attack in 2002, ranging from hate speech and graffiti to physical assaults. Forum 18 continues to monitor the situation.

20 January 2002 – The entrance door and glass wall in the Adventist church in Backa Palanka were broken and destroyed. Police inspectors told the Adventist elders that the perpetrators were drunk young men "who did not intend to promote religious intolerance." (Humanitarian Law Centre report on 24 January 2002, also Gradjanski list)

7 February 2002 – Novi Sad's mayor, Borislav Novakovic, personally repainted a wall that equated the Jewish Star of David with three numerals 6 and a Pentagram – both symbols of Satanists. On that occasion he expressed his concern about similar hate attacks and a lack of tolerance. (B92 on 8 February 2002).

15 February 2002 – Unknown perpetrators broke windows in the Adventist church in Omoljica, near Pancevo, for the second time in 2002. (Forum 18 information).

From 24 February to 2 March – The Adventist church in Belgrade was stoned three times. On 26 February, on BK TV, there was a repeated TV programme which portrayed Protestants were very negatively portrayed and Adventists were associated with Satanists. On 4 March a group of high school students yelled and threatened people at the front door of the Belgrade Adventist church. Police intervened and went to the neighbouring school to interview and warn the students. (Forum 18 information).

During March 2002 – Jehovah Witnesses were very negatively portrayed in the "Vranjske novine", the local newspaper of Vranje. A house that supposedly belonged to them and that was reported on in the previous edition was stoned, because they were repeatedly called sects. (Forum 18 information).

9 March 2002 – A petrol bomb was thrown at the car of the Catholic priest in Sremska Mitrovica. The incident was well covered by the media, and several dignitaries went to visit the priest. (Danas, 11 March 2002, Dnevnik 12 March 2002).

11 March 2002 – The wall of the church yard of the Evangelical-Methodist Church in Stara Pazova was painted with the word "SECT" and posters with the same word were posted. The same thing happened to the Adventist church's wall and to the Nazarene's prayer hall wall. (Forum 18 information).

During April 2002 – A hand grenade was thrown at the newly built Jehovah's Witness kingdom hall in Vrbas. No one was injured. Daily stoning of the Belgrade kingdom hall in Milorada Mitrovica street, and graffiti at the kingdom hall in Radoja Dakica street reading: "Out of Serbia!" and swastikas. (Forum 18 information).

During April 2002 – The local Socialist Party of Serbia in Backa Palanka refused to rent its premises to the Adventist church for a seminar, because unknown persons threatened to set the conference hall on fire. The seminar was held at another location, but cut short, due to disruptions and heckling of the participants by people who kept barging the hall. (Humanitarian Law Centre report on 29 August 2002)

8 April 2002 – Someone threw a petrol bomb at the car of Stanisa Surbatovic, Baptist pastor in Niksic, Montenegro. The police investigation only found that this was not an unintentional act. (Forum 18 information).

22 April 2002 – The Muslim Sandzak Democratic Party strongly condemned a hate speech by Serbian Orthodox Bishop Filaret at a rally held in Novi Priboj. "He used words in his speech from his well known chauvinistic vocabulary on who knows how many occasions." (Radio Novi Pazar news at 2pm on 22 April 2002)

During May 2002 – Radio Odzaci cancelled a local Adventist broadcast programme after receiving serious threats due to the broadcast of "sectarian programs". (Humanitarian Law Centre report on 29 August 2002).

1 June 2002 – Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists and Pentecostals were portrayed as dangerous sects/cults in the ISKRA magazine, and Alexander Mitrovic, Pentecostal pastor from Novi Sad, was specifically named. (Forum 18 information).

6 June 2002 – The Romany Evangelical Church in Leskovac was broken in to and offering money was stolen. One week later, on 12 June, the Serbian Evangelical Church in Leskovac was broken in to and a sound mixer and PA system were stolen. The police opened criminal investigations. (Forum 18 information).

From 7 to 10 June 2002 – Five tombstones were destroyed in the Jewish cemetery in Subotica. The police found glue and plastic bags at the scene, and believe that it was done by drug edicts with no other motivation. (Glas javnosti 13 June 2002).

21 June 2002 – Partially broken windows and the entrance door to the Adventist church in Sremska Mitrovica. A previous attack occurred during the night of 31 May to 1 June which caused greater physical damage. (F18NS information).

15 July 2002 – Graffiti was drawn on the Adventist church in Borca, near Belgrade, reading: "Out of Serbia" and "Sabbatarians are the sect". The local pastor reported that members of the "Obraz" organisation (an ultra-nationalist group) had made inquiries about the church in previous weeks. (Danas, 16 July 2002).

17 August 2002 – Graffiti of an exploding bomb painted on the wall of the Adventist church in Backa Palanka. The perpetrator, Vanja Knezevic, in 2001 wrote "Poisoners of the Spirit" and "Get out of Serbia" graffiti, and was charged with property damage. (Humanitarian Law Centre report on 29 August 2002)

From 21 August until 12 October 2002 – The Adventist church in Smederevo was stoned eight times, and large amount of material damage was reported. The office of the public prosecutor is conducting a criminal investigation. (Forum 18 information, B92 on 4 September described the stoning as an organised activity).

During October 2002 – Graffiti with the upside down cross and Serbian nationalistic insignia painted on the Evangelical-Methodist church in Vrsac. (Forum 18 information).

During November 2002 – The German Lutheran-Reformed graveyard in Pancevo was planned to be "reconstructed" by the local government, but in fact was partially destroyed by the workers. After the media, the Ministry of Culture and Religion, and the German Embassy in Belgrade became aware of this, work continued on the graveyard in a proper fashion. (Pancevacke novine 13 November 2002).

12 December 2002 – Milan Gligoric, a Jehovah Witness and a conscientious objector to bearing arms, was sentenced to 4 months in prison, with a 2 year suspended sentence, by a military court. (War Resisters International Alerts, 17 April 2003)

16 November 2002 – "Glas javnosti" daily newspaper tried to connect "Novi zivot" (Campus Crusade for Christ) with the suicide of a student Milan Kircanski, in the context of "dangerous sects" that are active in Serbia.

24 December 2002 – The Anglican priest and members of the Belgrade Anglican church were prevented by radical 'Orthodox' believers from entering the Orthodox Patriarchate to celebrate a Christmas service. Fifty young men, mostly holding icons and candles in their hands, stopped the Anglican believers, including the British Ambassador Charles Crawford, from entering the building. (Numerous local media reports, Danas 26 December 2002, B92 on 25 December 2002)

29 December 2002 – After several verbal attacks on Mirjana Hercog, who is a paediatrician in Cacak and of Jewish background, someone wrote anti-Semitic messages and symbols on the facade of her house: "Crystal Night", "Serbia to the Serbians", "ZOG Will Fall", etc. Ms. Hercog described these messages as fascistic. (B92 on 29 December 2002).

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